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Looking into Bulgaria from the outside: the so-called “stereotypes”. Can we trust them?

Anna Angelova

Abstract: The essay examines the current situation in Bulgaria, the stereotypes, and in particular the relations between majority and some ethnic minorities. The focus is on the stereotypes and identity as well as the different manifestation of identity and identification.

Keywords: Bulgaria, stereotypes, majority, minority, identity, identification.

Introduction

Nowadays people who try to do a research, to write a book, to solve the problems in their relationship or to understand the world of twenty first century, choose as a starting-off point the similarities or just the contrary – the differences between people. But this seems to wide and will not be able to give any results, so a specification is needed here – and this is, it is necessary to be pointed out, not just a detail, but an important element – a classification or an indicator by which to place the people in different group. And some would say that this is a trend of today, or a way of thinking (to group things in order to study them), but it is most proper to say that this is the way the world is build – by grouping creatures into different species, and for human beings – to differentiate by asking questions of identification: Who am I? What group do I belong to? How I differ from others or what do we have in common? These questions, becoming more and more complicated with years are the leading mechanism of nowadays improvement – by realizing and building up our own identity, our group identity in accordance with who we are, what we are good at, what we like, who we want to become; our national identity and even supranational identity, considering the fact that after the world suffered from two great wars, the most important priority became and remained living in peace and united, staring more at our similarities then in the differences.

Stereotypes

Giving a wide lead in the topic, discussed below standing “in the shoes” of people staying on opposite sides, gives an opportunity for showing a brief view of how important role the identity plays in every single situation of our everyday life, no matter if we decide to become scientists or we have personal problems to solve. Even in the second case, we first need to build up an identity of our own and then compare it with others’ identities in order to understand who we can be close with or have nothing in common with. But it is also interesting to state, that on the second place

of importance we can classify national identity. Moreover, this is a variable which simultaneously is an element of our personal identity and makes us part of a huge group (so this makes it a specific kind of group identity) which however cannot change due to our interests, hobbies, even the place that we live. The last though can give a nuance and shape the national identity a little, but the roots we have in a concrete place of birth can never change. And due to the impatience to become more specific, this academic essay will put more concreteness to its every word by researching a very particular case. The object of interest is the Bulgarian national identity while the more specific topic is the way other nations see the Bulgarians through the so called “stereotypes”. This is interesting to the author as well as curious for the readers because of the inner contradictions of the Bulgarian national identity both for the Bulgarians and for the other nations. The importance of studying exactly the stereotypes is based on the fact that they give criteria, according to which any individual can be included or respectively excluded from a group. This is based on historical, geographical, geo-political and social grounds which altogether construct the complexity of the problem. The thesis that this text aims to prove is that stereotypes in their nature are based on simple subjective opinions and cannot be applied in every particular situation; they lead to prejudice and cause division according to different indicators; and in the particular case examining the Bulgarian national identity, the stereotypes that people from other nations have are mostly based on what they have heard and not on their own experience, or if it is in accordance their or someone’s experience, than it is just considering one or two single cases, which can be very subjective if applied to any Bulgarian. And finally, the problem that this essay has to solve is whether and how these stereotypes stand in the way of building Bulgarian national identity even today.

The methodology used for a proof of the thesis is an analysis of the knowledge and experience of people from different nationalities, work spheres, and totally different in their opinions for Bulgaria and the characteristics of its citizens.

No other beginning of argumentation of the thesis could be given than an examination of the nature of stereotypes. As it was already said in the introduction, in most of the cases they can be classified as groundless and based on everything else but proofs and personal experience. But what is surely based on experience is the real researchers’ and scientists’ thesis which can be firm ground for building arguments, setting foot on proved facts over the centuries. Walter Lippmann is among the people with highest interest for the nature and causes of a stereotype. He defined this phenomena as a “distorted picture or image in a person’s mind, not based on personal experience, but derived culturally.” [1] Lippmann reasoned that the formation of stereotypes is driven by social, political, and economic motivations, and as they are passed from one generation to the next, they can become quite pervasive and resistant to change. This explained how public opinion was formed and manipulated because of what we trust as an ‘authentic messenger’. The so build impressions of the outer world tend to be unrealistic because they deflect through subjective personal perceptions. On the other side we can see Bergson [2] and Maslow [3] arguing that thanks to the stereotypes we categorize the objects of our attention which is energy- and effort-saving. The Bulgarian most significant fingerprint on the topic is left by Chavdar Hristov [4] who defines the stereotypes as “mental constructions” for an easier and more accessible way of recognition. But this is again as the arguments of Lippmann standing for the thesis by calling the stereotypes “cognitive monsters”. Mentioning Lippmann again, he presents to the readers 3 aspects of the stereotypes:

- They are always a simplified picture of reality
- They are “received” from the outside and not based on personal experience
- Most of the stereotypes are based on wrong notion

- Stereotypes are extremely sustainable (*they are “convenient” and avoid additional questions*) [5].

Stereotypes and Bulgaria

So what we can conclude based on the above, is that nature of stereotypes and researchers speak in defence of the author’s thesis. Then for another argument, the first place that shows average people’s opinions in their whole diversity is Google. But the Italian Anglophone edition “Local” have already prepared a list of the greatest stereotypes connected with 9 European countries. The reason exactly 9 countries were under a research is to celebrate the Europe Day on 9th May. The method (though more experimental than academic) offers the most frequently searched phrases for each country, and the results for the one we are most interested in for the current study are as follows:

Why Bulgarians

- *Are stupid?*
- Nod in approval when they want to say *NO?*
- *Hate the Serbians?*
- *Have such dark skin? (considering that in Europe “Bulgarians” brings “gipsy” to mind)*

Whether we like this tendency or not (though we are not here to value the positivity of the information), the facts speak for themselves and this essay proposes showing both sides of the coin – negative and positive perception of Bulgarians and their country. The fact that no one can run away from his national identity, no matter how far he lives for example, is also one of the main arguments of the Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov [6] in one of his essays. He motivates his rejection of opinions that whole nations could be stupid or evil, or lazy, or whatever could come to your mind, by the fact that the opinion can be based on a couple representors of the nation and no one can be sure whether those representors were good or bad examples. This intensifies the sensitivity of every citizen and makes him believe every word more doubtless. And the Bulgarian case is a typical example – not really knowing where to locate Bulgaria and whether it should be on the map of Europe, people from other nations yet form their stereotypes not according to the country nature, politics or culture, but to meetings with Bulgarians. But what is once build as a stereotype stays the same for many years, as we have already learned from Lippmann.

Trying to reach a higher point in the argumentative part of the essay, one should not forget the aims of this research, one of which is to search for empirical proof that stereotypes are groundless. Another point of view that can be tried in order to prove the thesis is the well-known phrase “a coin has two sides”. The opposite sides of our “coin” of interest here are the two main types of opinions: on one hand - the vision of Bulgaria as a dark spot “somewhere”, not sure even if in Europe; and on the other hand – a lit up by the Sun place, belonging to the European identity.

Stereotypes are inseparable element of the system of Bulgarian national identity, even the ones that depict the Balkans as “dark and wild”. This is in accordance with the sociologist Aleksei Pamporov’s words who have prepared his own research [7] of stereotypes and social distances towards minorities. In his opinion, stereotypes can be seen both in West Europe’s view for Bulgarians mostly as gipsy people acting like criminals and in the Bulgarians’ own expectations for the politics elite – “all of them are scoundrels” comes from Bulgarian literature of the 20th century and remains valid hundred years later.

And just because poor Bulgarians are not satisfied with their elites, they always look what is happening across border. This is the thing that the first negative argument leads to. Non-Bulgarians see locals’ world map consisted of two countries: Bulgaria and Abroad. The citizens of the second

country may not know where the first one is situated, they have a nice and calm life and every part of it is enviable for Bulgarians. This is why Bulgarian citizens always give people from Abroad for example. Well, before leaving anyone to be misled that finally we found a wholly true stereotype, the counter-argument fighting this belief claims that this prejudice for “the miserable Us” and “the desirable Them” is born in communist time, when everything from the “outer world” was luxury. One could immediately say that a characteristic of the today Bulgarian society is the post-communist way of thinking, which is definitely a fact. But let’s try to look from a different angle – when building a world with huge cross-border societies, uniting instead of dividing, can we still speak of “Outer world”?

For every controversial question like the last one, both answers will have defenders. But a fact which should not be underestimated is that “it is hard to catch the truth behind the Political correctness.” [8] And still keeping the memory of talking about borders, let’s mention Ljubljana Jezernik’s [9] generalization of the perceptions from 16th to 20th Century: Western travelers crossed the Danube as if it was a cultural border, exposing only misery and primitiveness. This is a way of comparing with Europe (again we meet the motive for “us” and “them”). And exactly here seems a good moment to give an example from the above-cited article (*За какви ни вземат чужденците*) with the journalist Frank Stir. His words consist of the sad “truth” according to the already well-known dark stereotypes, and the bright sunlight of the non-fully believer of the common words. He finds exactly this division of “us” and “them” especially between Bulgaria and Europe. He claims that, both considering the fact that many people cannot find Bulgaria on the European map, and also that Bulgaria is the oldest national country in Europe but due to Ottoman’s reign over the country, people finally started thinking for Europe as something different and distant. But it is almost sure that no one would argue with his opinion, bringing smile to his face while speaking – Bulgaria is definitely a good place to celebrate, dance, sing and drink.

Since this essay moved to the brighter side of the so called “coin” from the metaphor, let’s look up for more proof that if stereotypes exist, at least there has to be both positive and negative ones. But a chronological turn is required for clarity and logical connection between the elements. The map of stereotypes claims that “Americans have no idea where Bulgaria is, Austrians believe we are thieves, France sees us as poor wilders, Italians – as babysitters, etc. [10] But what can be considered as more eligible are world scientists’ and politics’ opinions during the history [11]. This type of stereotypes though can be argued again both as valid due to their sustainability and also as not valid in accordance with the counter-argument given in the very beginning of defining stereotypes in Lippmann’s words.

- Englishmen’s words for the Bulgarian civilization: *Arnold Toynbee* – there are 21 civilizations in the world and the Bulgarian is among them; Bulgarians were the fairest nation and most of all they honored virtues;
- French scientists’ and politics’ words for Bulgarians: *de Gaulle* – Bulgaria is the cradle of European civilization; *Francois Mitterrand* – Bulgarians are among the creators of civilization;
- Italian scientists’ opinion for the Bulgarian nation: *Sante Gracioti* – Bulgarians kept for centuries the ottomans away from the heart of Europe – the price they paid was their blood, faith, freedom and the decline of their brilliant culture;
- Many other examples can be seen in the reference [11].

And if a reference can be made to the first definition of stereotype in the text, even at the starting-off point it is visible that this is its characteristic – opinions settled years ago and transferring into

today with a particular role. So comparison will be needed between the old glory and the new reality for the Bulgarians but as promised in the introduction – again from different point of view. The examining point at last will be the auto-stereotypes of Bulgarians, i.e. whether and in what way their self-assessment has changed. Returning to Pamporov's research [12], we can find evidence that lately variety of positive characteristics come to the foreground: beautiful, smart, crafty, kindly, hospitable and hard-working, but at the same time “lazy” is a qualification Bulgarians still use to characterize themselves, together with envious. Commonly known for Bulgarians is that they pick holes in all, even in themselves.

Conclusion

Looking back to the evidence, arguments and counter-arguments, it turns out that all of the above can be agreed by someone, but argued by others as well. Stepping first on the nature and definition of stereotypes, then considering opinions both of elites and average people, all from different nationalities, and finally providing the reader with great examples, evaluating throughout time of both positive and negative stereotypes, was enough to show the diversity of the problem of stereotypes is. It can be concluded with no doubts that all above mentioned stereotypes (positive or negative, old or their transformed versions of today, views from the others or self-stereotypes) reflect and shape the national identity timely as they alter, mostly because of their capability to easily mislead people to believe on already set opinions instead of creating their own state of mind. But this is a serious and even growing problem which demands a more detailed research, finding empirical proofs for all the variables which can be arguing for or against every stereotype. But until that happens, it is up to each of us to define whether to follow the common voice or raise our own one.

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